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LETTER FROM AMERICA

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The New York World Trade Center attack: Forensic Experts gather to identify victims

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On September 11, 2001 both towers of the New York World Trade Center were destroyed by terrorist attacks. Initial estimates showed over 6,000 victims were lost. Forensic experts from the New York area were summoned and responded to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Manhattan. The office is usually a busy place in normal times, but with such a tremendous number of expected victims it was transformed into a small, secure town within the city. 24-hour response was begun. Law enforcement agencies controlled the perimeter. Each area of expertise established areas for their teams. Supply areas were created with tenting. Break areas and service areas also became part of the canvas skyline. The refrigerator trucks were lined up and a very large tent structure was erected for protection against the weather. Food service areas were set up by the Salvation Army and were staffed 24 hours a day with hot food available around the clock. Outside lighting made it daylight regardless of the position of the sun. The grim task of identification began as the recovery efforts at Ground Zero uncovered more and more victims. Groups in charge of

antemortem information worked with the Family Assistance Center to obtain the needed information to make the identifications possible. As the operation evolved, tents were replaced with trailers and everything seemed to be planned around the cold wet winter expected to hit before any end would come. Relief and assistance came from across the United States. The experts arriving began to look like a publishing house list of authors from all the forensic specialties. People dropped the things they were doing and came to the assistance of the New York Medical Examiner.

As things like this do, a rhythm developed and all the workers found their stride. The operation began to run quite smoothly. A system evolved and the largest forensic response to a terrorist attack rolled along, accomplishing the task of identifying victims and returning them to their families.

Then out of the sky, on November 12, 2001, American Airlines Flight 587 crashes into a suburb of Queens. The same area many of the lost firemen, lost police, and rescue workers lived. Over 260 victims were added to a now revised list of 4,200 at the World Trade Center. Operations were conducted simultaneously at the OCME in Manhattan. This was only fitting, due to the level of activity already going on there. Both operations ran well, with forensic workers dealing with dual numbering systems and filings. The identification process on Flight 587 was completed December 13, 2001. The operation at the World Trade Center continues.

...You might ask why have I taken time to rehash what has been so prominent on all the news services? My answer is this, I work in a community of scientists who deal daily with crime, hatred and death. They see the worst side of mankind and the toll it inflicts on all the law-abiding citizens of the world. They do the jobs that most people would turn away from...

You might ask why have I taken time to rehash what has been so prominent on all the news services? My answer is this, I work in a community of scientists who deal daily with crime, hatred and death. They see the worst side of mankind and the toll it inflicts on all the law-abiding citizens of the world. They do the jobs that most people would turn away from. They continually look for truth and justice among all the lies and deceit. And yet, when their day is done and they get a call for help in a situation like New York, they drop everything to lend a helping hand. Those with years of experience working side by side with the neophytes of the profession, exchanging ideas and trying to help the families of these victims get the answers they need. They give up time with their families, friends and local responsibilities when they sense the need for help. When a second disaster hits in the same area, they roll up their sleeves and tackle it.

I feel a sense of pride that I am a forensic scientist. I am glad my colleagues show how much they care by the acts they do. Forensic experts work behind the scenes. Very seldom do they receive the thanks they so deserve. In this editorial I want to thank not just the forensic scientists who have helped with the tragedies in the United States, but all the members of our profession who strive to do their duty for society and answer the questions their cases present. Thank You! May your new year be wonderful and fulfilling. May your practice of forensic science be rewarding and enlightening.

Peace and life to all.